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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novel. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Amy Tan achieves a studied portrait of Chinese-American life through interlocking points of view. *The Joy Luck Club* is a serial first person narration, recounted by eight narrators rather than one. Each narrator provides her own point of view, as she recounts her experiences. Tan designs this serial narration like a hand of mah-jong, as it moves from player to player according to the “Prevailing Wind.” Further, each narrator sheds light on the life of another narrator, as the narrators are friends and family members. Suyuan Woo’s death precipitates this story-telling, as the daughter inherits her seat at the mah-jong table. As June Woo begins and closes the novel, her point-of-view predominates the text.



Discussion Activities

Why does Tan title the first section “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away?” Look at the first paragraph from each of the first four stories. How do these introductions depict the point-of-view of the narrator?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one character that has appeared so far: June Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, or Ying-ying St. Clair. Have them imagine that the novel is going to be told entirely from the perspective of this character. Ask them to write a paragraph describing the virtues of the character and another describing her weaknesses. What qualities should the author focus on to make this version of the novel work? What advantages does Tan gain by creating a series of narrators rather than a single one?



Homework

Have students read the next two chapters (pp. 87-115). Several characters have been introduced so far: Lena and Ying-ying St. Clair, Waverly and Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu, and June Woo. What are the primary motivations of each of these characters?